

Obituary

Dr Phillip Alexander Clancey

1917–2001

Dr Phillip Alexander Clancey was born on 26 September 1917 in Glasgow, Scotland. His family subsequently moved to London and then to Switzerland where he started school. By the age of seven he was back in Scotland where he attended several schools in Glasgow before studying at the Glasgow School of Art as a young man. He served with the Allied forces in Sicily and Italy during World War II, escaping death by the narrowest of margins on several occasions and was deafened in one ear for over two months by an artillery explosion. He was de-mobbed in 1946 and employed by an engineering consortium in the north of England for a few years. Ornithology, however, remained his abiding passion and in 1948–1949 he accompanied Richard Meinertzhagen on an ornithological expedition to eastern and southern Africa and the Middle East that included Yemen, Aden, Somali, Kenya and South Africa.

He immigrated to South Africa in August 1950 to assume the post of Curator of the Natal Museum, in Pietermaritzburg. He was appointed Director of the Durban Museum and Art Gallery on 1 January 1952 and held this post until his retirement over 30 years later on 25 September 1982. He remained a Research Associate of the Durban Natural Science Museum until the date of his passing. Two nieces who reside in Scotland survive Dr Clancey.

Clancey was a prodigious scientific author on African birds, especially their taxonomy, with a particular interest in the identification of subspecies. Examples of his many catalogues and books include *Catalogue of the Birds of the South African Subregion* (1965–1972), *Handlist of the Birds of Southern Mozambique* (1970–1972), for which he was awarded the prestigious Gill Memorial Medal of the Southern African Ornithological Society (now BirdLife South Africa), *The Birds of Natal and Zululand* (1964), *The Gamebirds of Southern Africa* (1967), *The Rare Birds of Southern Africa* (1985) and *Kingfishers of Sub-Saharan Africa* (1992). He was

the chief editor of the *S.A.O.S. Checklist of Southern African Birds* (1980). Dr Clancey was a co-author of the second volume of the landmark *Atlas of Speciation of African Birds*, published by the British Museum (Natural History) in 1978. He also contributed as an author to *The Atlas of Southern African Birds* (1997). His list of other publications is even more impressive, running to a monumental total of over 530 scientific papers and associated articles. Indeed his legacy of taxonomic papers is unsurpassed and Dr Clancey named some 200 subspecies of southern African birds. Others have named several avian subspecies in his honour.

He served as President of the Southern African Ornithological Society, was the long-standing Chairman of its List Committee, and was awarded Honorary Life Membership by this organisation. The American Ornithologists' Union honoured him by appointing him as a Corresponding Fellow. He was also a long-standing Chairman of the Natal Bird Club (now BirdLife Port Natal) during the Club's formative years and subsequently served as its President. In addition, he served as President of the Southern African Museums Association and was awarded a Fellowship by the Museums Association in London. The University of Natal conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa* in 1981.

Dr Clancey was almost single-handedly responsible for amassing the collection of some 40,000 bird skins housed in the Durban Natural Science Museum. His skill in the preparation of bird skins was renowned and the Museum's collection, the third largest in Africa, is widely acknowledged as the finest on the continent. Clancey organised some 26 major expeditions in Africa during the course of this collection's compilation. His trips to Mozambique were the most noteworthy and resulted in the largest collection of material in existence from this poorly known region. His discovery of the Lemon-breasted Canary *Serinus citrinipectus*, a species new to



science, and of the southern Mozambique population of the Olive-headed Weaver *Ploceus olivaceiceps* were particular highlights of these investigations. His success in placing the museum at the forefront of African ornithology is reflected in the large number of eminent ornithologists that have served there during and since his tenure, including Walter Lawson, Richard Brooke, Clive Quickelberge, Ian Sinclair, Dr John Mendelsohn and Dr Aldo Berruti.

His artist talents are evident in the many bird paintings presented in his books and in the dioramas on display in the Durban Natural Science Museum. Some of the latter were repainted up to six times until they matched his exacting standards. Several million visitors to the Museum have enjoyed these displays since their unveiling. His avian portraits remain in high demand by collectors of fine African art; for example his work has graced the boardrooms of companies such as Barlow Rand.

Dr Clancey was a rare combination of outstanding scientist, author, artist and administrator. His immense contribution speaks for itself and the meticulous dedication characteristic of his life's work serves as an example for others working in the various fields, which this man so ably mastered. 🐦

David Allan